DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 188 212 CS 205 638

AUTHOR Van Slyke, Judy Kulstad
TITLE Defining Public Relations: Toward a Theory of Science.
PUB DATE Aug 80
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (63rd, Boston, MA, August 9-13, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Models; *Problems; *Public Relations; *Role Perception

ABSTRACT

Noting the lack of a widely accepted definition of public relations, this paper discusses several definitions that have been formulated and dismisses them as inadequate and fraught with understatement. It then suggests that a more appropriate and satisfactory approach to the problem might be to think of public relations as an immature and ineffective science along the lines of Jerome Ravetz's model presented in "Scientific Knowledge and Its Social Problems." The paper concludes that the model fits and that it need not be a source of embarrassment to those in public relations since an immature and ineffective science can function effectively and can engage in work that will open paths to its maturity. (Author/FL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED188212

Public Relations Division

DEFINING PUBLIC RELATIONS:

TOWARD A THEORY OF SCIENCE

By

Judy Kulstad Van Slyke
Assistant Professor

Public Relations Department
S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications
Syracuse University
215 University Place
Syracuse, New York 13210
315-423-3368

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Judy Kulstad Van Slyke

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS205638

Presented to the Public Relations Division, Association for Education in Journalism Annual Convention, Boston, Mass., August, 1980.

An inescapable ambiguity in the field of public relations lies in defining or describing just what it is we teach and practice under the rubric of public relations.

What is public relations? Why do we have such a hard time answering that question? Or is public relations doomed to the crisis of identity from which it still appears to suffer despite the fact that public relations practitioners have "been around" for more than a century?

Certainly the lack of a widely-accepted definition is not due to lack of attempts. Some of these attempts have described public relations in terms of what it is not, a rather backward approach which has nonetheless yielded some helpful information. Thus, we know that public relations is not publicity, nor press agentry, nor propaganda, but rather something larger than the whole of these parts.

In looking at these eliminatory definitions, it is possible to identify a major weakness that perhaps accounts, at least in part, for their general unacceptability: they attempt to define public relations in terms of what it does -- the skills and end product of public relations activity -- rather than in terms of what it is. These definitions define public relations as a body of skills and methods incorporating aspects of a number of communication techniques.

Other public relations practitioners and scholars have eliminated this weakness from their definitions. They

have focused instead on categorizing public relations in juxtaposition to broader spheres of study and practice for which there do exist commonly-accepted definitions. But as we will see in the discussion which follows, even broader, more commonly understood and accepted definitions are subject to misinterpretation and misassumption.

Condition, Discipline or Profession?

Lawrence W. Nolte offers one of these "categorical" definitions, identifying public relations as a "condition." Depending upon whether the public has much, some, little or no confidence in an organization or institution, that organization or institution is in a "condition" of good or bad public relations.[1] The medical analogy of the organization or institution as the patient and public relations as the disease or cure is interesting, but offers little of substance towards a definition of what that disease or cure is.

Others suggest that public relations is a discipline, or at least a subject matter in search of a discipline. But while it is certain that a public relations subject matter exists -- after all, public relations practitioners "do" and professors "teach" something -- it is by no means an easy task to fit public relations into the accepted model of what constitutes a discipline. According to Dwight Waldo, a discipline may be viewed, at least in part, as a more or less coherent subject matter studied or taught in an independent academic department on a par with other social sciences.

Waldo's model is too ambitious for application to public relations since it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify a coherent body of systematic theory -- one of Waldo's conditions -- that is public relations' own.[2]

But Waldo offers a suggestion worthy of consideration: that it might be more appropriate to adopt a "professional" perspective in solving this crisis of identity. The professional stance, he maintains, is the only one broad and flexible enough to cover diversity, yet firm enough to provide some unity and sense of direction of purpose. And, posits Waldo, you can act as a profession without actually being one.[3]

The concept of public relations as a profession has some merit, and certainly public relations seems to possess some of the distinguishing characteristics of a profession outlined by Waldo: a combination of art and science, theory and practice, study and application, using many disciplines and not united by a single theory but by a broad social purpose.[4]

But there are problems with this definition, too. A would-be profession can be recognized as a profession only by common consent of both those within and those outside the field; it is one thing to call medicine a profession, given the strong public and medical practitioner consent that exists around that definition, but quite another to presume that the public -- and even some public relations practitioners -- can agree that public relations is a profession when many can't even agree on what it is public relations does or is supposed to do.

If public relations is to be defined as a profession, it must therefore have followed the path of other skills -- law, medicine, accounting -- which have been transformed into professions by convincing those who use their services that those services are indispensable to survival and success. But this is not the case with public relations. The public relations practitioner and his client are still uncertain about the legitimacy of public relations' professional claims, and the field is only on the threshold of attaining professional status. The body of knowledge is still skeletel. The relationship with the academic, research-and-theory-oriented world is still tenuous. The quality of training being provided through formal educational channels for a public relations career is spotty. And finally, while ethical standards in public relations are steadily improving, enforcement mechanisms are lacking. Much of the effort toward filling these gaps is being undertaken, ambitiously, by the Public Relations Society of America and the Association for Education in Journalism. But these organizations will be unable to bring about significant professionalization of public relations until they win acceptance as the authorized and appropriate standard-setters for the field, an acceptance that does not now exist because there are many who practice public relations outside the PRSA or AEJ "fold."

Applied Social/Behavioral Science

One of the more inclusive definitions of public relations is provided by Edward J. Robinson. Public relations,

says Robinson, is an applied social and behavioral science which measures, evaluates, and interprets public attitudes; assists management in defining objectives for increasing understanding and acceptance on the part of the public; equates those management objectives with the interests, needs and goals of various publics; and develops, executes and evaluates programs to earn public acceptance and understanding.[5]

Much of Robinson's definition is concerned with the tasks and responsibilities of public relations, but his advocacy of the social-behavioral science approach in describing public relations is an attempt to define the field as an element in the body of scientific knowledge.

However, to call public relations a science -- social, behavioral or other variety -- is to ignore the precision with which "science" can be and is defined and delineated.

Thomas S. Kuhn, in his comprehensive The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, offers one such precise definition. He says science is research firmly based upon one or more past scientific achievements that some scientific community acknowledges as supplying the foundation for its further practice. Kuhn introduces the concept of the paradigm as "universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners,"[6] an accepted theoretical framework within which scientific search is conducted.

According to Kuhn, practitioners of a true scientific

specialty have undergone similar educations and professional "initiations," have absorbed the same technical literature, and see themselves as uniquely responsible for pursuit of a set of shared goals, including training of their successors. Scientists thus share paradigms or theories, a commitment to those theories, and a set of values as to what is acceptably accurate, qualitative, and consistent.

Even if one were to accept Robinson's premise that public relations is an applied social or behavioral science, it can be argued that this is merely pseudo-science, or as Paul Erlich puts it, an "aping" of the hard, pure science. Social science, Erlich says, is "primitive" science.[8]

There is a little incontrovertible evidence that public relations deserves to be regarded as a scientific discipline, social or "pure." The body of universally-accepted theory or paradigms in public relations is virtually non-existent; a cleavage exists between the public relations academic and the public relations practitioner over whether a "real world" or "ivory tower" approach should prevail. Public relations researchers too often have mistaken old facts and old views for new, and have been unable to evaluate the significance of new movements and methods.[9] Frequent "pirating" of concepts and theories from the social sciences, and the dressing of those theories in new phrases, have resulted in the predictable consequence of public relations' contribution to the literature of communication being ignored,

and perhaps properly so.[10] There is a paucity of research based upon one or more past scientific achievements, and in fact some would argue that there aren't even any past scientific achievements, only attempts to solve one particular practical problem at a time.[11]

Just as public relations fails to meet the theoretical criteria of Kuhn's definition of science, so it fails to meet the criteria of professional education and initiation into the specialty. Public relations practitioners come from a variety of educational backgrounds: liberal arts, newspaper journalism, marketing, and public relations curricula, to name a few. There is very little technical information to be absorbed and shared, as Kuhn postulates there should be in a science.

Immature and Ineffective Science

So where does that leave us in an attempt to adequately define or describe public relations? If we eliminate definitions of public relations as a condition, or a discipline, or a profession, or an applied social or behavioral science, what's left?

An appropriate method of defining public relations might be to apply Jerome Ravetz' model of the "immature and ineffective science" -- a would-be science striving for more scientific status.

Ravetz, in Scientific Knowledge and its Social Problems, says immaturity or ineffectiveness in a field can

be recognized through several symptoms or conditions:

1. the absence of facts achieved through results of research.

2. reliance more on "folk science" than on verified scientific principles.

3. emphasis on exchange of personal impressions in educational programs rather than on a body of widely-accepted standard theory and concepts.

4. inconclusive research and scholarly activity.[12]

By examining public relations for the presence of these symptoms or conditions, it can be demonstrated that public relations does in fact fit Ravetz' model.

1. The absence of facts achieved through results of research. From an examination of public relations literature, it is clear that there is a famine in the area of public relations research. James Grunig and Ronald Hickson, in a 1976 survey of publications in the field of public relations which was undertaken with the funding of the Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education, found a dearth of research relating specifically to public relations concepts. "Theory-building and theory-using research is being conducted in communication fields related to public relations...but little such research or even theorizing is being done by researchers whose primary interest is in public relations," they note. "Practically no attempts have been made to develop a coherent set of concepts or a coherent theory of public

relations or of the behavior of publics."[13]

Perhaps public relations practitioners have neither the time nor the financial support to conduct research to systematically test and develop a body of knowledge. In most professions that function has been given to the academic community, which has "produced." But public relations academics have not.

However, Grunig argues that the traditional, "logical positivist" approach to science as formulation and falsification of theories has contributed to the lack of research in public relations. This classical model of science leads to what Grunig calls an unfortunate distinction between basic and applied research. Applied research, says Grunig, is "devoid of theory, research designed to answer a question for a specific situation and the results of which can be used only in that situation."[14] Most public relations research falls into the applied category; it may answer practical questions of public relations practitioners but because no theoretical explanation results from the research, it is of little use to anyone else. Perpetuation of the belief that applied research is "inferior" to basic, logical-positivist research, Grunig says, will continue the split that now exists between "the Chi-squares and green eyeshades," the academic and the professional worlds of public relations.[15]

Grunig proposes, as a solution to this polarization within the field of public relations, the development of what

he calls applied basic research. The philosophy of this new form of research would say that research begins with an event or phenomenon of concern to the researcher, and of concern to practitioners, and explains public relations problems but builds theory at the same time. Starting with a practical problem, this new basic applied research would use an existing theory or design a new theory to explain that problem, rather than proceding from theory to practical test problems as is the case in basic research.[16]

2. Reliance more on folk science than on verified scientific principles. The case study method has been widely adopted by public relations writers and researchers to examine and explain identification and solution of a variety of practical public relations problems. These case studies tend to examine what was effective in a given situation, and make unverifiable assumptions as to values of particular courses of action taken by the public relations practitioners and organizations involved. According to the Ravetz model, this one-situation-at-a-time approach is a mark of folk science, since there is no cumulative development of accepted results which are invariant under changes in the problems to which they are applied.[17]

The recognition of certain general statements as largely true, and the distillation of those statements into proverbs or maxims is additional evidence of folk science at work in public relations. These maxims range from "the better

they know you, the more they'll like you" as a justification for increased organization-to-publics communication; to "truth rides the storm while half-truth and falsehood blow away" as a mandate for accuracy and completeness in communication; to "people are what interest people most, then things, and lastly ideas" as a content guide for public relations communication vehicles.[18] They may be "cute," but these generalizations certainly are not theory-based, or based upon scientific verification within the field of public relations.

3. Emphasis on exchange of personal impressions in educational programs rather than on a body of widely accepted standard theory and concepts. We already have discussed the lack of widely accepted theory and paradigms in the field of public relations. Given this lack, it is perhaps understandable that a 1976 survey of public relations education conducted by the Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education found that more than half the public relations courses taught in American colleges and universities were basic principles courses with a "how-to" orientation. Few included any theory.[19] This study recommended a basic curriculum which would include general communications studies courses such as communication theory, writing for print and broadcast, graphics and communications law; core studies in public relations such as an introduction to the history, principles and practices of public relations and public relations case problems; and, on the graduate level, research

methodology and development of new public relations theory. However, these are only recommendations, and standards for public relations education vary widely, even though accreditation bodies set general parameters.

Part of the difficulty in standardizing public relations curricula, as suggested by Raymond Wiley and others, is that the academic "home base" of public relations education varies from independent-department-status in schools of communications to bastard-child, sub-department-status in newspaper or journalism departments to "adjunct" status in business administration or management programs. As Wiley notes, "the study of public relations does not look large in any curriculum. Little time and small credit are given to theory-synthesizing courses in public relations, while the vast majority of effort is spent on basic work in other areas that feed into these courses."[20] Public relations has not developed as a separate academic discipline as did, for example, sociology, political science, psychology or economics. It is seen, for the most part, as a specialized segment of some larger professional discipline, be that journalism or business. And therefore, public relations teachers may not be so much interested in discovering or passing along "truth" as they are in making special application to public relations of the "truth" being developed in other fields with which public relations is allied.

4. Inconclusive research and scholarly activity.

We addressed the dearth of research-produced public relations theory in our discussion of Ravetz' first symptom of an immature and ineffective science. There is too little research and scholarly activity taking place in public relations, perhaps because there are too few researchers interested in public relations, or because there are too few public relations educators with research experience, or because there are too few academic public relations programs to train researchers.

But even if we were to examine the research and scholarly activity that has taken, or is taking, place, we would see that much of the scholarly "product" is not even close to being universally adaptable or beneficial to the field of public relations. Much of the research is one-situation based, and cannot be generalized to other situations. Other research is preoccupied with the gathering of numbers and statistics to the exclusion of interpretation and analysis of that number-crunching.

There is little agreement among practitioners and educators as to what constitutes conclusive, quality research. As Grunig notes, "To the professional, the academic researcher seems to pursue theory which has little practical relevance. To the educator, the professional seems so concerned with his day-to-day problems and with research related to his problems that he has little interest in research that will advance the profession as a whole or with theory-based research that will be broad enough to have application for more than one practitioner or organization."[21]

Conclusion

Public relations seems to fit Ravetz' model of the immature or ineffective science. But is this an insurmountable weakness? Need it be a point of embarrassment to those in public relations?

The answer to both questions is "no." An immature or ineffective field can function effectively. It will have methods for solving problems, and can continue to draw upon its body of skills for the completion of tasks. There may be no scientifically-satisfactory explanation for solutions to public relations problems, but it can be determined from experience that these methods and solutions work. Aphorisms can be the basis for action rather than scientific law.

The danger is that an immature and ineffective science will pretend to be what it is not, and will refuse to accept its immaturity and ineffectiveness. It may thus, as Ravetz puts it, "condemn itself to remain in that state, rather than engaging in the sort of work that would open paths to its achieving maturity of a character appropriate to itself."[22]

If public relations educators and practitioners accept their status as immature and ineffective scientists, they will realize that the steps being taken toward greater professionalization and continued development of a body of theory and concepts unique to public relations are important, appropriate, and maybe even necessary to the full development cycle of bringing public relations to mature and effective status.

Footnotes

[1] Lawrence W. Nolte, Fundamentals of Public Relations: Professional Guidelines, Concepts and Integrations (New York, N.Y.: Pergamon Press, 1979), p. 4.

[2] Dwight Waldo, "Scope of the Theory of Public Administration," in J.C. Charlesworth, ed., Theory and Practice of Public Administration (Philadelphia, Pa.: American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1968), p. 9.

[3] Ibid., 16.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Edward J. Robinson, Communication and Public Relations (Columbus, O.: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1966), pp. 5-7.

[6] Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd ed. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 177.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Paul Erlich, "Book Reviews," Human Nature, August 1978, pp. 20-23.

[9] James F. Tirone, "Education, Theory and Research in Public Relations," Public Relations Review, Vol. V, No. 1, p. 19.

[10] Ibid.

[11] James E. Grunig, "The Two Worlds of Public Relations Research," Public Relations Review, Vol. V, No. 1. p. 13.

[12] Jerome Ravetz, Scientific Knowledge and Its Social Problems (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 156-378 passim.

[13] James E. Grunig and Ronald H. Hickson, "An Evaluation of Academic Research in Public Relations," Public Relations Review, Vol. II, No. 2, pp. 35-36.

[14] James E. Grunig, "Theory and Research in Public Relations," a paper presented before the Association for Education in Journalism Public Relations Division meeting in Seattle, Wash., August 1978, p.2.

[15] Ibid., P. 3.

[16] Ibid., p. 5.

[17] Ravetz, op cit., p. 156.

[18] G. Edward Pendray, "Public Relations Folklore," Public Relations Journal, Vol. XXVI, October 1970, p. 20.

[19] James E. Grunig and Ronald H. Hickson, op. cit., p. 35.

[20] Raymond Wiley, "How We Educate Students for Public Relations Careers," Public Relations Journal, Vol. XXVIII, September 1972, p. 29.

[21] James E. Grunig, "The Two Worlds of Public Relations Research," op. cit., p. 11.

[22] Jerome Ravetz, op. cit., p. 377.